

CURRENT ISSUES**Saying the ‘F word...in the nicest possible way’: augmentative communication and discourses of disability.**

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This paper examines a case study of a severely physically disabled man, Ralph, in terms of his interaction with his carers. He communicates using various systems of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC, such as symbol boards and high-tech devices), the vocabulary for which has mostly been selected for him by others. The starting point of the paper is the assumption that disabled people have traditionally held a disempowered position in society (relative to non-disabled people), and the question is asked, to what extent is Ralph further disempowered by the limited vocabulary available to him in his AAC systems, and in the way others interact with him. The paper draws on the work of Bourdieu, according to whom “Language is not only an instrument of communication or even of knowledge, but also an instrument of power” (1977, p648). I consider the tensions between the drive towards the empowerment of disabled individuals, as exemplified by the provision of AAC, and opposition to allowing access to certain types of vocabulary (especially expletives such as ‘the F word’), unless it is expressed in ‘the nicest possible way’.

Bourdieu, P. (1977). "The economics of linguistic exchanges." *Social Science Information* 16(6): 645-668.

Introduction

This paper centres on a case study of a man named Ralph (a pseudonym). He lives in a group home for adults with physical disabilities; he also has learning disabilities and requires high levels of support from the staff at the home. Ralph is able to communicate through speech (intelligible to those who know him well) and a variety of methods of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC). Although narrow, the field of AAC is international, and one of the main fora for interested professionals is the journal “AAC Augmentative and Alternative Communication”, which publishes “scientific articles....concerning assessment, treatment, rehabilitation and education of people who use or have the potential to use AAC systems” (Augmentative and Alternative Communication journal website). Rarely does the field draw on

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disability studies more broadly, or more mainstream areas of study such as sociology. Nevertheless, a belief driving those that work in the field of AAC, and of individuals who have little/no speech and their families, is succinctly put by Corbett (writing about special needs): “Whatever form our language takes, the importance of self expression is overwhelming. It is what makes us human” (Corbett 1996:85).

This article draws on the broad sociological perspective of Pierre Bourdieu who said “Language is not only an instrument of communication or even of knowledge, but also an instrument of power” (Bourdieu 1977:648). It also examines the sociocultural approach to language of James Gee (2012). Bourdieu’s and Gee’s bodies of work are linked by the concept of discourse, which is discussed below in terms of how the day to day interactions between Ralph and his carers are embedded within (and reflective of) the wider sociopolitical context and constructions of disabled people in current UK society. In making these links, AAC can be seen as an example of how broad societal discourses of disability can be both reproduced and challenged within daily interaction.

Discourses of disability

Gee’s concept of discourse is a broad one: “Discourses are ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking...that are accepted as instantiations of particular identities...by specific groups” (2012:3). An example of a group would be disabled people. According to Shakespeare (2000) disabled people are an oppressed group, stereotyped as ‘other’ in a number of ways, such as by being seen as dependent, vulnerable and as unable to make their own decisions or speak up for themselves. Nondisabled society being the dominant group, creates a discourse of disability which is inevitably ideological, encompassing as it does ideas regarding relative status and worth (Gee 2012); Gee notes “discourses are intimately related to the distribution of social power and hierarchical structure in society” (Gee 1996:2). This is both reflected in the interaction between individuals, but also reproduced through interaction.

Although this oppressive discourse of disability can be regarded as dominant, it is not the only one. Indeed, in this paper I propose that AAC itself can be regarded as challenging traditional power relations between people with disabilities and wider society and therefore has a role to play in the empowerment of disabled people with severe communication impairment.

Augmentative and Alternative Communication

AAC refers to “techniques which support or replace spoken communication” (Communication Matters 2012). For Ralph these include facial expression, and symbols within his communication book and his (electronic) voice output communication aid. In common with many augmented communicators, Ralph is not able to generate his own complex novel messages by spelling; instead he uses a combination of pre-stored words, phrases and sentences. A disadvantage of this is that whoever is storing messages in an AAC system needs to be able to predict what the user will want to say. The process of vocabulary selection is therefore crucial to the effectiveness of communication, and confers a degree of power over that individual’s self-expression.

Communication serves a variety of purposes and the AAC literature acknowledges that these all need to be reflected within an individual’s AAC system. Light (1998) identifies four purposes, one of which is the ‘expression of needs/wants’; an example from Ralph’s aid, would be “I need the toilet now please.” Light’s ‘information transfer’ category is similarly functional. In fact, messages serving such purposes rather than ‘social closeness’ or ‘social etiquette’, (Light’s final two categories) or the expression of feelings tend to predominate in Ralph’s AAC systems (a common bias in many people’s AAC).

In exploring the discourse involving Ralph and his support workers I was interested in finding out about how decisions were made about what messages to include in Ralph’s AAC systems and what influenced these decisions. I interviewed Ralph himself, his Speech and Language Therapist, and his carers (who all contributed to the selection of vocabulary for his AAC); but it is particularly the views of his key worker and care home manager which I focus on in this paper because these seemed particularly revealing, regarding wider views on the status and possible identities available to Ralph. If AAC does not offer a comprehensive and unproblematic solution to Ralph’s communication needs, to what extent can it be regarded as empowering for him?

Challenging or maintaining dominant discourses?

Ralph's carers clearly viewed him as having things to say, and he was involved in choosing what words and messages to include in his communication systems. However, they did not see AAC as having a substantial role in the expression of feelings: instead they looked to his facial expression for this, possibly because of the absence of tone of voice to match his facial expressions in such circumstances. I was therefore interested in how Ralph could convey mood and a sense of personal identity. I put the following question to his key worker and care home manager:

Author: what if Ralph wasn't a very likeable person and went around swearing all the time? Would you put swear words on his communication system if that was the kind of person he was?

Carer A: I suppose you'd have to.

Carer B: yeah you would. If that's the way they feel and that's what they want to say that's fine.

This appeared to provide evidence of a relatively enlightened societal discourse around disability. However, on probing further I found what appeared to be underlying support for the traditional patterns of power relations between disabled and non-disabled people.

Author: so in theory you wouldn't have a problem with putting loads of swear words into a communication system?

Carer B: you wouldn't say the F word; you would say them in the nicest possible way.

Expletives such as 'the F word' uttered in anger would thereby be robbed of their emotional power. Evidently, Ralph is not permitted full access to certain types of discourse which would usually be fully accessible to people of his age, gender and cultural background. It appeared that staff found it unacceptable for Ralph to use his communication aid to express feelings that they might find unpalatable, and indeed they could prevent him from doing so.

Thus the traditionally dominant discourse of disability is both challenged and maintained through the language Ralph is permitted to use. The unequal level of linguistic competence experienced by Ralph and his carers (i.e. between augmented and natural speakers) is likely to compound the asymmetrical power relations common to all interactions. Whether natural or augmented methods of communication are used, in both instances the listener needs to accord the individual the 'right to speech' (Bourdieu 1977) i.e. to believe, obey, and respect them. Even in the relatively sympathetic environment of this care home, Ralph appears to hold insufficient 'authority' to command this from all listeners, as evident in the censorship of his vocabulary and responses to his self-expression through AAC. Ralph's limited access to the community's verbal repertoire means that he has little scope to vary the style of his language in order to underline his own authority.

Diamond (1996) suggests that power is consensual and therefore open to negotiation through discourse; a less powerful participant in an interaction usually has strategies available to contest the power held by the more powerful person. However, people with severe communication impairment such as Ralph may not be able to reject the roles assigned to them, partly because of their limited communicative competence. In addition the identities available to Ralph as a disabled person are limited by the discourses of disability enacted in his care home. But there appeared to be ambiguity within Ralph's care relationships. This 'fluidity' of the social context (Ng and Bradac 1993), if sufficient, may allow for interaction to influence existing power hierarchies. AAC may have a part to play in this. According to Bourdieu it is not only the discourses a person is able to produce which result in a certain type of reception, but the combination of all forms of capital; "speech always owes a major part of its value to the value of the person who utters it" (1977:652). In Bourdieu's terms, Ralph may not always have the power to impose reception; rather it is conditional on what he says being considered appropriate by those in positions of power. In Ralph's case, swearing in certain ways would seem to break the rules of acceptability which govern what is sayable, and by whom, in this context (Bourdieu 1977). It appears that some staff may want to empower the residents to say whatever they want only as long as it is said 'in the nicest possible way'.

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